

I hear some of my friends coming to the floor to compare this or that aspect of American society or our tax policy with Europe and other countries. Well, I think it is important that we look at this chart—how we treat our children.

What this chart shows is that Finland, Norway, and Sweden all have childhood poverty rates of less than 5 percent. Switzerland, Belgium, Austria, France, Denmark, and Germany all have childhood poverty rates of less than 10 percent. The Netherlands has a childhood poverty rate of slightly more than 10 percent. But in the United States of America, the childhood poverty rate is 21.9 percent, or more than double that of France, Germany, Austria, or the Netherlands.

Now, why is that an important fact? It is important, obviously, that the children are vulnerable; that as adults, we are responsible for the children and we are failing those children. But it is also important to note that we have, as a nation, more people behind bars, incarcerated, than any other nation on Earth, including China. And if anyone thinks there is not a direct correlation between high poverty rates for kids and kids who mentally drop out of society, get involved in self-destructive activity at young ages, and then end up in jail, you would be kidding yourself. And the issue here is whether we address this crisis of 21 percent of our kids living in poverty, whether we provide for those kids or, 15 or 18 or 20 years later, whether we lock them up at \$50,000 a pop.

There have been recent discussions about the economy, whether we are in a recession or entering a recession. But the truth is, despite President Bush's assertions, this economy has been a disaster for middle-income and working families from day one. Since President Bush took office in 2001, median household income for working-aged Americans has declined by almost \$2,500. That is what we call the collapse of the middle class. Over 8½ million Americans have lost their health insurance. That is what we call the disintegration of the health care system in America. Three million workers have lost their pensions. And the idea of a defined pension program is increasingly becoming ancient history. More and more workers are wondering what is going to happen to them when they retire, and the idea that there will really be a defined pension program for them when they retire, that is not something most workers, especially younger workers, believe.

The annual trade deficit since President Bush has been in office has more than doubled, and over 3 million good-paying manufacturing jobs have been lost. The price of gas at the pump and home heating oil has more than doubled, while ExxonMobil made \$40 billion in profits last year—more than any company in the history of the world. That is \$3.20 for a gallon of gas, which working people in Vermont can't afford. Workers in Vermont often trav-

el long-distance to and from work. And \$40 billion in profit for ExxonMobil. Home foreclosures, of course, are now the highest on record. Meanwhile, while the middle class is shrinking and poverty is increasing, the wealthiest people in this country have not had it so good since the 1920s.

My friend from Oklahoma mentioned that there are issues we just don't talk about, and he has a point. But one of the issues we don't talk about in this body—for pretty obvious reasons, to my mind, because who pays for the campaigns around here—is the growing disparity, the outrageous disparity of income and wealth in this country.

What this chart shows is that the wealthiest 1 percent of the population now owns 34 percent of the Nation's wealth, while the bottom 90 percent owns only 29 percent of our wealth. That is here.

So what you see is the richest 1 percent owns more wealth than the bottom 90 percent. Is that what America is supposed to be about? Is that the kind of society we want? There is a lot of discussion that takes place on the floor of the Senate, in the House, about the economy. But at the end of the day, when you look at the economy, what is important, most important, is not economic growth, not GDP, what really is most important is what is happening to the average person.

You can have all of the growth you want, and you can see ordinary working people experiencing a decline in their real wages. You can see a lot of wealth being created, but it does not mean a whole lot to ordinary people if most of that income and wealth is going to the people on top.

The bottom line is that in the economy there are winners and losers. It is very clear that in the economy today, the middle class is losing. Lower income people are being decimated while the upper income people have never had it so good.

I know my friends in the Senate on both sides of the aisle—I speak as an Independent—hesitate to talk about that issue. But it is imperative that we do talk about it. Let me go to another chart.

This chart talks about the economy in terms of how different groups are doing. This chart shows that the wealthiest 1 percent saw its total income rise by \$180,000 in 2005 or more than what the average middle-class family makes in 3 years. This is the rise in income, not what they make; this is just their increase.

So the wealthiest 1 percent are doing phenomenally well. That is on average. That is a pretty good year, on average, seeing an increase of \$180,000 in the year 2005. This is according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Meanwhile, the average middle-class family received a \$400 increase. That is that small little box down here, an increase in annual income in 2005.

CBO also found that the total share of aftertax income going to the top 1

percent hit the highest level on record, while the middle-class and working families received the smallest share of aftertax incomes on record.

So when people understand in their gut that what is happening is the middle class is shrinking and the rich are getting richer, well, that is what it is about. That is the fact. That is precisely what is happening in America.

In addition, according to *Forbes* magazine, the collective net worth of the wealthiest 400 Americans—400 Americans, that is not a lot of people—increased by \$290 billion last year, increased by \$290 billion to a total of \$1.5 trillion. Not only have the wealthiest 400 families, the richest 400, seen an increase in their wealth, their combined income has more than doubled from 2002 to 2005.

At the same time, the average income tax paid by the wealthiest 400 Americans has fallen from 30 percent to 18 percent. That is not BERNIE SANDERS, that is according to the *Wall Street Journal*. The reason the average income tax for the wealthiest people who are making astronomical sums of money, why that has been cut in half, is mainly due to Bush's tax cuts, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

The middle class is shrinking, poverty is increasing, and the wealthiest people have not had it so good since the 1920s. That is an overview of the state of our economy.

Now, why do I raise these issues? I raise these issues because if we truly do not understand what is going on around our country in the lives of ordinary people, people who cannot afford to fill up their gas tank, cannot afford a college education for their kids, cannot afford childcare, cannot afford to take care of their parents, if we do not understand that reality, it is pretty hard for this body to make good public policy.

The question then is, what do we do? What do we do? Well, President Bush gave us his answer in his budget. What President Bush, in his budget, said is, at a time when the richest people in America are becoming richer, what should we do? Well, let's give them even more tax breaks. That makes a lot of sense to the richest people in America and George W. Bush.

And what did he say to the poorest people in America? Well, poverty is increasing. There is a level of desperation going on in this country that we have not seen in many years. So at a time when poverty is increasing, what do we do? Well, according to George W. Bush, you cut back on the aid and programs that help low-income and middle-income people. That is precisely what Bush's budget was about; one of the more absurd documents that I have ever seen in my life.

Fortunately, that budget has been placed where it belongs; that is, in the garbage can. We are now debating a much different budget, a budget that is far better, the budget that we have before us. I am proud to be a member of